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Detroit court hears tale of Vietnam intrigue, bribery

By MICHAEL BROGAN
News City-County Bureau

Agents of the U.S. Treasury Department are in possession of transcripts of Wayne Circuit Court testimony of a Detroit engineer who says he was led through a "cloak-and-dagger" adventure in the Republic of Singapore in 1969. The "adventure," according to the engineer, Paul N. Erickson, 54, involved implications of bribery of South Vietnam civilian officials and even of Viet Cong guerrillas to assure the safe passage of surplus war material out of South Vietnam.

And, he says, it involved one threat on his life.

Erickson's testimony came during a breach of contract suit brought against him by Paul Van Hee, the man who hired him to go to Singapore to act as operations manager for Norton Private Ltd.

NORTON, which operates out of a small office at 20550 Vernier, Harper Woods, is headed by Van Hee.

Assistant U.S. Attorney William C. Ibershof had no comment when asked if federal agencies were reviewing Erickson's testimony.

But Judge Charles Kaufman, who heard and dismissed the breach of contract suit, said yesterday that a man identifying himself as a federal agent asked for and received a copy of the transcript from his court Monday. Erickson said in court he was hired by Van Hee in 1969 to go to Singapore to act as operations manager for Norton.

He was to be paid a salary of \$35,000 a year, and he said, given a \$12,000 a year expense account.

But Erickson said when he and his wife, Lilian, arrived in Singapore in mid-June, 1969, his job — as outlined to him by associates of Van Hee — "was quite different than what I was led to believe."

Instead of overseeing the procurement, packaging and shipment of surplus war

to Singapore, Erickson said, he was led through two days of cloak-and-dagger meetings "that are something you read about in adventure books."

UPON ARRIVAL in Singapore, Erickson said, he was met by Chan U Sek, a man who identified himself as Van Hee's business partner. Accompanying Chan was a Major Siet from the Singapore military, Erickson said.

Erickson said they told him it was imperative that he charter a small plane in Saigon the next day and fly into the northern South Vietnam village of Qui Nhon, located in Viet Cong-controlled territory about 20 miles west of the coastal city of Da Nang.

At Qui Nhon, Erickson said, he was told to meet with soldiers of the Royal Army of South Korea who would be guarding a store of surplus war materiel.

"They (Chan and Siet) told me that the stuff was being stolen all the time and that it had to be moved to Da Nang for shipment out," Erickson said.

He said the two men told him that although the highway to Da Nang was in Viet Cong hands, he could assure safe passage to the coast by bribing the guerrillas.

Although that discussion shocked him, Erickson said, there was more to come the next day when an associate of Chan's, a K. H. Tan, took him to the South Vietnamese embassy in Singapore to obtain visas, export permits, an interpreter and laborers for work in Qui Nhon.

Erickson said during discussion with one South Vietnamese, embassy official, Tan gave the man a package of American currency "apparently to assure that everything would go all right."

AFTER THAT INCIDENT, and after being told by Chan and Siet that he would have to fly into Vietnam the next day, Erickson returned to Singapore and found his wife nearly hysterical.

His wife, Erickson said, had received a telephone call from a man "with a German or Dutch accent" who said "... tell Mr. Erickson if he knows what is good for his health, he will be out of the country in the next 24 hours."

The following morning Erickson said, he and his wife left Singapore for Seattle because he was afraid.

From Seattle, Erickson said, he telephoned Van Hee at his Grosse Pointe Park home.

"His first reaction was to ask me why I hadn't gone to Bangkok (Thailand) and wait for him there," Erickson said in a court deposition.

After being told of what happened in Singapore, Erickson said, Van Hee said he would "have to fly out there to clean up the mess," according to the court deposition.

Erickson said he never heard from Van Hee again until October, 1969, when Van Hee sued him for breach of contract and asked Judge Kaufman to order Erickson to return all of the \$19,000 Van Hee had advanced the engineer.

Erickson had repaid about \$9,000 of the advance money under an agreement with two of Van Hee's employees, according to the deposition.

In dismissing the breach of contract suit, Judge Kaufman ruled that Van Hee had no basis to collect the money since, in effect, he had asked Erickson to bribe the Viet Cong — enemies of the U.S. government.

ERICKSON said he is still unsure of the arrangement Norton Private or its foreign office, Norton International, had with the Singapore government.

But apparently, Erickson said, Norton had entered the high bid on surplus U.S. military material for sale and was reselling it to Singapore.

Erickson said he never saw any of the material Norton bought from the U.S. military, but he said he saw catalogues printed by the U.S.

office, most of it was rolling stock.

Listed in the catalogues are heavy trucks, buses, portable generators, truck trailers, hoists, electronic equipment and some earthmoving equipment.

Van Hee, 43, was unavailable for comment yesterday, and his own deposition in the court record is vague about what the Norton firm deals in.

Van Hee and Erickson first met as co-workers at Cadillac Gauge Co., in Detroit, which makes weapons for the U.S. military.

Norton's office in Singapore lists the firm's business as "explosives."

THE MAN now heading Norton's Singapore office is Bernard F. Wood, 39, who Erickson believes replaced him after his 1969 episode.

Wood told a Philadelphia Evening Bulletin reporter in Singapore last June that Norton International also once employed George Fassnacht, 38, who was arrested last summer in Philadelphia and charged with possession of a basement full of arms, ammunition.

At the time of the interview in Singapore, Wood refused to say what Fassnacht did for Norton, saying it was "classified."

Fassnacht, free on a \$2,500 bond while waiting resumption of his trial in Philadelphia on the arms charge, was apparently an international seller and buyer of arms.

During the Singapore interview, Wood, who reportedly has a posh home in a Singapore suburb, said he also works for the Singapore government, but that his job there is "classified."

Fassnacht's wife, Janet, said at the time of her husband's arrest that he had told her in 1969 that he was employed by the CIA.

Wood either Fassnacht or Wood.

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A Look Into the Twilight World of George Fassnacht

By JOSEPH R. DAUGHEN

Of The Bulletin Staff

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It is a long way from the basement of 528 Rhawn st. to the one-room office of Norton Private Ltd. in downtown Singapore, but George E. Fassnacht has made the trip.

Fassnacht is the 35-year-old Philadelphia Police Department ballistics expert turned Central Intelligence Agency operative who was arrested Thursday after authorities uncovered the largest private munitions cache in the city's history in his Fox Chase home.

Janet Fassnacht, 35, and her four daughters from a previous marriage had lived atop the arsenal since May 29, 1968, when she married the close-mouthed weapons collector.

Headed for Orient

Fassnacht, however, did not. Two months after the wedding he left the four-bedroom brick twin home and headed for the Orient to ply his peculiar trade. He returned only once—for about a month in the winter of 1969.

While he was gone, Fassnacht flitted from Hong Kong to Saigon to Singapore, living the twilight life of a man whose occupation was intrigue and whose source of strength was secrecy. Much of that intrigue and secrecy was—and is—centered in the one-room office of Norton Private Ltd.

Bernard F. Woods, 39, operations manager of Norton Private, sat at his desk in Singapore and cautiously discussed Fassnacht with a special correspondent of The Bulletin.

'Program Director'

"I am not going to disclose what George is," Woods said. "I can't disclose it. It is classified. My firm has nothing to do with George except he worked for Norton Interna-

tional and I am employed by the same firm."

Fassnacht worked for about a year as "program director" of Norton International Corp., of Harper Woods, Mich., which is affiliated with Norton Private Ltd. Both firms appear to be as mysterious as Fassnacht.

Paul Norton Van Hee, 44, president of Norton International, told The Bulletin in an interview that his firm is engaged in "management, marketing and consulting." The company was chartered on Sept. 15, 1969, and last year had sales of \$175,000. Although it is presumably a normal business seeking customers, Norton International does not advertise in the Yellow Pages, said Van Hee.

Norton Private, in which Van Hee said he has "an equity position," is registered in Singapore "to carry on the trade or business of manufacturers of explosives, gun powder of every description, nitroglycerine, dynamite, gun cotton or other substances or things."

'Can't Describe' Business

Norton Private was founded April 16, 1969, with a capitalization of about \$1.6 million. It has 70 employees, but only three are in Singapore. The rest are in South Vietnam. Asked what business Norton Private is engaged in, manager Woods said:

"I can't very well describe it. My boss brings people together to do tasks. I work for the local (Singapore) government, but what I do is classified."

Behind Woods' desk was a bronze plaque with an inscription that read in part, "The end of the fight is a tombstone white, with the name of the late deceased. . . Who tried to hustle the East—Rudyard Kipling."

Fassnacht's fight with the law is not yet ended, and there are no known tombstones in the case. But what is clear is that someone was trying to hustle something in the East.

Cellar Was His Domain

Mrs. Fassnacht, interviewed by police, said she could never remember when her basement was not crammed with munitions. Her husband, she said, was unyielding on the subject of the basement.

"He explained that all the guns and bullets and munitions were his own personal business and that the cellar was his domain and we could do anything we wanted in any part of the house, but the cellar was his," she said. Her daughter Cynthia, 14, was permitted to enter the basement occasionally.

"I used to go down the cellar with my father and clean the bullets for him so they would not get old."

Where did all the weapons and explosives, including some manufactured in Communist China, come from? Some had been in the Rhawn st. home, and in the home of friends, for years. Others had been shipped there from Japan and other places.

How did Fassnacht acquire them, and what was their final destination?

"Some people like girls, others like booze," said Woods. "George likes guns and collects them."

All Familiar With Guns

Fassnacht's associates knew all about guns, too. Van Hee and two other men—vice president John E. Corazzol, 35, and secretary-treasurer James M. Klodfelter, 41—are the officers of Norton International. Before they formed Norton, all three men worked for Cadillac Gage Co. of Warren,

Mich. Cadillac manufactures armored vehicles, machine guns and rifles.

Van Hee refused to say what Fassnacht's job was, and he would not discuss Norton's business. He also said it would be "a very rash assumption and a rash dramatization" to link his firm to the CIA.

Although Van Hee described his company as "not very large, a CIA agent seemed to be familiar with it. Told only that Paul Van Hee had refused to confirm or deny any possible relationship with the CIA, and without identifying Van Hee's firm, the agent replied, "We have no relationship with them at all."

Worked Out of Saigon

Mrs. Fassnacht told police that her husband was employed by the CIA when she married him and he remained a CIA employee for two more years, until about May 1970, working out of Saigon. He then went to work for Norton Private, she said, although Woods and Van Hee say he was on Norton International's payroll. Explaining how she got in touch with her husband, Mrs. Fassnacht said:

"You call the long-distance operator and tell her you want to talk to someone at Norton Ltd. Co. in Singapore."

"My husband has had very little contact with me and I have no mailing address except for the Norton Co. at 45 D Robinson road, Singapore."

Mrs. Fassnacht used this mailing address even though Fassnacht, until earlier this month, leased a four-room flat at 38 Watten drive, also known as Rise) in an upper-middle-class neighborhood of Singapore peopled mostly by Americans and Europeans.

Wife Is Expecting

Mrs. Fassnacht, whose brother formerly was a detective in the Philadelphia Po-

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